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Agency wants farmers to use recycled water

Project would cost $385 million

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A North Coast water agency is looking at increasing water supply for farmers through a project that would use recycled water.

The Sonoma County Water Agency is proposing the project, which would supply 21,500 acres of agricultural lands in the Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River valley areas with municipal wastewater that has gone through a three-step treatment process.

The water would be used for irrigation and frost protection, said Dave Cuneo, the Sonoma County Water Agency's senior environmental specialist, who is managing the project's environmental documents.

The project also would provide recycled water for irrigation to the city of Santa Rosa, the town of Windsor and the Airport/Larkfield/Wikiup Sanitation Zone, Cuneo added.

The Sonoma County Water Agency announced the plan, officially called the North Sonoma County Agricultural Reuse Project, on March 20.

The agency is a special district that serves as a water wholesaler and environmental steward, said Brad Sherwood, the agency's programs specialist. The Sonoma County Water Agency in turn serves other water agencies that provide service to 600,000 people in Sonoma and Marin counties.

The water reuse project would include the design and construction of storage reservoirs with an estimated 11,200 acre feet of storage, 112 miles of transmission pipelines and pump stations, the plan documents report. It also would store water in some reservoirs currently in use, such as the Gallo Asti and Gallo Twin Valley reservoirs.

The project would cost an estimated $385 million to build, Cuneo said.

The areas the project would serve currently use surface and groundwater from Dry Creek and Russian River tributaries, Cuneo said.

He said most of the project's annual water supply - 7,234 acre feet - would come from the city of Santa Rosa's tertiary wastewater system. Much of the city's wastewater is transported through a pipeline and injected into geothermal wells at The Geysers steamfields. Sherwood said the plan calls for some of that water to be redirected to the agricultural acreage.

The plan projects that by 2020 Santa Rosa, Windsor and the airport areas will have an additional 8,500 acre feet of wastewater annually to dispose of and that the reuse project could ultimately store and deliver as much as 13,000 acre feet of wastewater each year.

A 60-day public comment period has opened on the plan and will expire May 18.

On May 15, the agency's board of directors will host a public hearing at its Santa Rosa office to take testimony from the public on the project and the draft environmental documents, Sherwood said.

Sherwood said one of the misconceptions about the proposal is that using the recycled water would result in loss of other water rights, which isn't true, he said.

"If you use recycled water, you still have your water rights and that's according to state water code," Sherwood said.

As to concerns about using wastewater for irrigation, Cuneo said a UC-Davis study showed use of recycled water poses no problems for crops or for the humans who use them.

Cuneo said the proposal "fits with our whole view that recycled water is a good resource."

A major plan benefit, according to the documents, would be less water diverted from the Russian River and its tributaries, which would minimize impact on endangered fish species such as coho and chinook salmon and steelhead.

A lengthy process is ahead, said Cuneo and Sherwood. After the public comment period closes, they must respond to all public comments on the agency's 603-page environmental impact report, and have the agency's board certify and approve the environmental documents. If the process goes smoothly, Cuneo said the certification could take place by August.

Once certified, the big challenge for the project, they said, will be funding. Cuneo estimated most of the money needed to complete the project would come from state and federal grants.

"It's not something that's going to happen overnight," Cuneo said. He estimated that the project would take 10 to 15 years to complete.

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